

## Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01

INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 MCT-01 EB-08 COME-00 SIL-01 LAB-04

DHA-05 /088 W

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R 081250Z SEP 77

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8192

INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AEMBASSY PARIS 5075

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 6400

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, ELAB, TS

SUBJ: ERUPTION OF VIOLENCE IN SFAX

1. SUMMARY: OVER WEEKEND OF AUGUST 27 INCIDENT DESCRIBED IN OFFICIAL PRESS AS "VERY GRAVE" ERUPTED IN SFAX. ACCORDING TO VARIOUS UNPUBLISHED ACCOUNTS, A GROUP OF ABOUT 12 PERSONS CONNECTED WITH UGTT ATTACKED SEVERAL CAFES IN CENTRAL SFAX THAT WERE SERVING REFRESHMENTS TO MOSLEM TUNISIANS IN VIOLATION OF RAMADHAN FAST. UGTT REGIONAL LEADERS HAD SOUGHT TO CLOSE CAFES THROUGH PRESSURE EXERTED ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND THEY REPORTEDLY RESORTED TO DIRECT ACTION WHEN GOVERNMENT TURNED THEM DOWN. THIS INCIDENT HAS GIVEN RISE TO VARIOUS STATEMENTS BY GOT AND PSD OFFICIALS ATTACKING "OPPORTUNIST" WHO SEEK TO USE RELIGION FOR NEFARIOUS PURPOSES. THESE STATEMENTS ARE DIRECTED AGAINST UGTT AND ITS TOP LEADER HABIB ACHOUR. ACHOUR HAS DEFENDED HIMSELF AND UGTT CLAIMING THAT HIS REGIONAL OFFICIALS IN SFAX HAD AVOIDED AS MUCH MORE SERIOUS OUTBURST OF VIOLENCE. END SUMMARY.

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2. OVER THE WEEKEND OF AUGUST 27 A GROUP OF ABOUT 12 PERSONS ATTACKED SEVERAL CAFES IN CENTRAL SFAX. ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS OF THESE INCIDENTS, THE ATTACKERS SOUGHT TO CLOSE THE CAFES FORCEFULLY FOR SERVING REFRESHMENTS TO MOSLEM TUNISIANS IN VIOLATION OF RAMADHAN FAST. ACCORDING TO ACCOUNT OF INCIDENT

PUBLISHED IN UGTT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER ECH-CHAB ON SEPTEMBER 2, LOCAL UNION OFFICIALS, INTERCEDING ON BEHALF OF CAFE WORKERS, HAD ASKED LOCAL GOT AUTHORITIES TO CLOSE CAFES. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY A NORMALLY RELIABLE JOURNALISTIC SOURCE, HOWEVER, THAT AFTER GOT OFFICIALS REFUSED, UNION LEADERS REACTED WITH ATTACK ON CAFES.

PRESS ACCOUNTS OF INCIDENTS IN PSD DAILY L'ACTION ON AUGUST 31 CHARACTERIZED THEM AS "VERY GRAVE." BUT GAVE ONLY SKETCHY DETAILS ABOUT CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING ATTACKS. IN AN ARTICLE ENTITLED "STOP THE OVERREACHING OF FALSE PIETISTS", L'ACTION CLAIMED THAT ATTACKERS SOUGHT TO STOP SALE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES OFFICIALLY PROHIBITED BY GOT DURING RAMADHAN FOR MOSLEMS) AND MELODRAMATICALLY DESCRIBED VIOLENCE DONE TO TABLES AND CHAIRS IN CAFES AND TO "PEACEFUL CUSTOMERS." L'ACTION CALLED THE ATTACKERS "REACTIONARY" AND ASSERTED THAT THE MAJORITY OF TUNISIANS REJECT FANATICISM AND DOGMATISM. "IT IS AN OPEN SECRET," L'ACTION SAID, "WHO IS BEHIND THE ATTACKS" AND CLAIMED THAT RELIGION WAS ONLY A PRETEXT. ATTACKERS WERE NOT OTHERWISE IDENTIFIED. AFTER THE INCIDENTS THE GOVERNOR OF SFAX RELEASED A COMMUNIQUE IN WHICH HE DEFENDED HIS POSITION THAT THE CAFES WOULD NOT BE CLOSED DURING RAMADHAN SINCE THIS WOULD VIOLATE CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION OF PERSONAL CONFIDENTIAL

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FREEDOM.

4. DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY OFFICIALS ALSO JOINED IN DENOUNCING SFAX INCIDENTS. PSD DIRECTOR MOHAMED SAYAH TOLD PARTY MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 3 IN MAJOR SPEECH THAT "OPPORTUNISTS" WOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF RELIGION FOR THEIR PERSONAL ENDS. HE CLAIMED THAT THE PARTY WAS THE MOST EFFECTIVE DEFENDER OF THE FAITH IN TUNISIA. SFAX MAYOR AND PSD POLITICAL BUREAU MEMBER TIJANI MAKNI DECLARED ON SEPTEMBER 3 AS WELL THAT ALL PARTY LEADERS SHOULD DEFEND FREEDOM AND PUBLIC SECURITY AGAINST THOSE WHO SEEK TO SPREAD ANARCHIC DISORDERS UNDER THE COVER OF RELIGION. MAKNI SAID THAT HE HAD DISCUSSED THE INCIDENTS WITH HABIB ACHOUR AND THE UGTT LEADER HAD TOLD HIM HE WAS AGAINST "VIOLENCE AND ALL RASH ACTS."

5. IN A PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN IN TUNIS ON SEPTEMBER 6 (WHICH WAS NOT REPORTED ON BY TUNIS PAPERS) ACHOUR BRIEFLY DISCUSSED SFAX INCIDENT. HE CLAIMED THAT AFFAIR MIGHT HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE SERIOUS HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR INTERVENTION OF UGTT AND ASSERTED THAT 10,000 PEOPLE

MIGHT HAVE DEMONSTRATED AGAINST CAFES REMAINING OPEN DURING RAMADHAN. ACHOUR MAINTAINED THAT TUNISIA IS AN ISLAMIC COUNTRY AND THAT GOVERNMENT SHOULD UPHOLD MOSLEM MORALS AND VALUES.

6. SFAX INCIDENTS HAVE HIGHLIGHTED ON-GOING CONFLICT BETWEEN UGTT AND GOVERNMENT PARTY OFFICIALS. MAJOR BATTLE LINES HAVE BEEN DRAWN BETWEEN UGTT LEADER HABIB ACHOUR AND PSD DIRECTOR MOHAMED SAYAH. STRONGLY WORDED ARTICLE IN L'ACTION ON AUGUST 31 GIVES IMPRESTWMN THAT SAYAH INTENDS TO GO ALL OUT AGAINST UGTT. IN THIS CONNECTION, WE HAVE HEARD IN RECENT WEEKS THAT SAYAH IS AGAIN MANEUVERING TO SET UP RIVAL TRADE UNION ORGANIZATION TO COMPETE  
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WITH ACHOUR'S UGTT. ACHOUR, FOR HIS PART, APPEARS TO HAVE TAKEN UP THE GAUNTLET. ASIDE FROM HIS STATEMENTS DEFENDING UGTT ROLE IN SFAX AFFAIR, HIS NEWSPAPER, ECH-CHAAB, HAS RECENTLY CRITICIZED GOT SEVERELY FOR FAILING TO CONTROL INFLATION AND SPECULATION. ALSO ACHOUR RETURNED FROM VISIT TO TRIPOLI OVER WEEKEND (SEE SEPTEL) TO MAKE STRONG ANTI-NOUIRA STATEMENT TO PRESS.  
MULCAHY

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## Message Attributes

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